

For the sake of agro-workers

Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

Article

- Poison Control - New Sunday Times - 05/01/2005

THE MIC President was last week reported as saying "this was a clear case of the poor being denied their rights" when referring to an incident involving a "land grab" (*Malay Mail*, April 22).

Nowhere is such comment more relevant when it comes to the proposed lifting of the ban on paraquat, which is now being hotly contested by the poor — this time the plantation workers over their rights to better health.

Dubbed as one of the "dirty dozen" pesticides, paraquat is widely used for weed control, at least before the ban, despite its deadly health effects.

For example, paraquat warnings recognise that "it is very toxic by inhalation; toxic in contact with skin and if swallowed; irritating to eyes respiratory system and skin; and can be a serious threat to health.

Its use therefore is either highly restricted or completely banned in many industrialised countries such as Austria, Denmark, Finland and Sweden, so too Hungary, Slovenia and Switzerland, according to some sources.

Indeed, reportedly a number of retailers have decided to eliminate products on which paraquat has been used in their production.

Since Jan 1, 2003 the largest Swiss retailer, Migros, has indicated that it only sells products containing palm oil produced without the use of paraquat, while the second largest Swiss retailer, Coop, sells only bananas produced without paraquat.

The International Policy of the Forest Stewardship Council, revised and approved in July 2002, prohibits the use of paraquat to all certified members.

Despite all these, removing paraquat from developing country markets is an uphill task due to the big business lobby.

To its credit, however, Malaysia was successful in banning it two years ago, joining the list of progressive industrialised countries, but not before an intense debate.

The move was hailed as ground-breaking, setting a precedent for other developing countries to follow.

Today, given that Malaysia is moving into agriculture in a big way, this decision has an even greater relevancy and currency. Hence the decision must stay as health for the agro-workers.

Sadly though, it may be short-lived, amidst indications that the ban on paraquat is being reviewed.

In all probability this is at the instigation of the manufactures and their lobbyist who are renewing their target on Asia, in the interest of their shareholders and profiteering.

Typical of big businesses, they will capitalise on any advantage, be it as slight as a change in the Ministry. After all, they have nothing to lose, although technically, it is difficult to see how the case should be re-opened.

The strategy is of course to advance the tired economic arguments yet again (a language many politicians understand) while neglecting entirely any consideration of human cost (an aspect many politicians refuse to understand or care little).

So, let us revisit the issue.

Paraquat is thoroughly well-documented as having wide-ranging toxic effects.

Based on authoritative sources, some of these range from simple headaches, skin rashes and ulceration, to nausea, nosebleeds, loss of finger and toenails, and eye irritation.

While most injuries are external, ingestion in amounts as little as one teaspoon is fatal.

These are well acknowledged by the experts and manufacturers themselves, despite numerous attempts to mitigate them.

Documentation at the National Poison Centre at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, showed that our people (regardless of age, mainly women) are not spared.

One needs to recall not so long ago how a whole family was lost to paraquat under the threat of a loan shark ([New Sunday Times, Dec 29, 2002](#)).

This certainly is the tip of an iceberg, since around one million Malaysian farmers use paraquat.

To make it worse, there is no known antidote for it, and thus death generally follows within a relatively short span of time accompanied by untold agony and sufferings.

Animals, including aquatic life, are also not spared the fatal effects of the poison.

According to the Scientific Committee on Plants of the European Commission, "paraquat can be expected to cause lethal and sub-lethal effects for hares, and this is confirmed by field reports".

The Committee also concluded that paraquat is hazardous to avian embryos.

Most of all, paraquat is well-known to be highly persistent in soil and bound residues may be transported in runoff with the sediment causing pollution, and may result in unknown health effects.

Only last week the Prime Minister reminded the Department of Environment (DOE) that it has to amend its rules and regulations if it fails to protect the environment, especially relating to the dumping of toxic waste.

It would therefore be extremely ironic if the Ministry of Agro-based Industries is persuaded to "amend" its existing policy to ban the use of paraquat, knowing full well that the toxic chemical will persistently pollute the environment.

The nation is still reeling from the shock that toxic waste are being illegally dumped in our environment.

We are still fighting against the sales of a toxic product containing some 4,000 chemicals (read: cigarettes) throughout the country.

Now we are faced with a dubious flip-flop suggestion of bringing back a banned toxic chemical with deadly health risk to our workers.

As to why all these are happening at all, it takes a toxic mind to comprehend.

[Terms & Conditions](#)